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UNCLAS VIENNA 000266

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DEPT FOR EUR/AGS, INR/EU, AND EUR/PPD FOR YVETTE SAINT-ANDRE

OSD FOR COMMANDER CHAFFEE

WHITEHOUSE FOR NSC/WEUROPE

E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: February 05, 2007

Molterer Defends Platter

1. The Eurofighter controversy continues to occupy Austrian politicians and media. Vice Chancellor Wilhelm Molterer (OeVP) has once again defended the purchase of the planes and emphasized that former Minister of Defense and now Interior Minister G|nther Platter had acted correctly. In this assessment, he was contradicted by his coalition partner: A spokesman for the SPOe pointed out the investigative committee had brought new insights that could not so easily be pushed aside. Mass circulation tabloid "Neue Kronenzeitung" quotes Josef Kalina, the SPOe spokesman, as saying that Minister of Finance Wilhelm Molterer showed a "relatively low problem awareness" in the Eurofighter case - pointing out that, in Molterer's function, "he ought to welcome any opportunity to save the taxpayer money." This was triggered by an appearance of Vice Chancellor Molterer in the Austrian TV broadcast "Pressestunde," where he outlined future perspectives for his party and the grand coalition. According to independent daily "Der Standard," Molterer sees no imminent change with regard to tuition fees. Concerning the public controversy about FPOe boss Heinz Christian Strache's past, Molterer emphasized that "anyone who has been elected a representative in the Federal Assembly, is part of the political process," but stated that, while isolation of Strache was not an option, he nevertheless wanted to establish a distance from the FPOe party boss. Molterer's TV appearance was criticized by other parties besides the Social Democrats. Green spokeswoman Madeleine Petrovic pointed out the lack of a government strategy with regard to the fight against the greenhouse effect. The FPOe deplored the "lack of perspective" of the grand coalition and BZOe Secretary General Gerald Grosz sees Molterer's statements as indicative of the present standstill in Austria.

Majority of Austrians Against Turkish EU Membership

2. A recent internet poll initiated by the Turkish Embassy in Vienna confirms that Austrians are clearly opposed to Turkish EU membership. 2,670 persons filled in questionnaires between September 19, 2006 and January 11, 2007. The result is that 74 percent do not regard Turkey as a European country. 40 percent said they would reject Turkish EU membership even if the country fulfilled all the conditions specified in the agreement with the EU and no job immigration would take place. Mass circulation daily "Kurier" reports extensively on the recent poll findings and cites, among others, historic reasons - the second Turkish siege - as a decisive facto in the Austrians' negative assessment of the Turkish EU ambitions. Turkish Ambassador Selim Yenel is nevertheless optimistic - he points out that 40 percent of

Austrians are pro-Turkey, which would mean that only 10 percent would have to be won over for Turkish EU membership when the time comes for a decision. Yenel wants to push for more positive view of integration - by his assessment, integration has been more successful than the public perceives it to be. The Ambassador wants to "correct the sometimes faulty image of Turkey" in Austria and argues for giving the EU ascension process a "fair chance."

Large Military Offensive in Iraq Imminent

¶3. A large military offensive is apparently under way in Baghdad in which parts of the city are to be cordoned off and purged of insurgents. This campaign is aimed at securing the capital, where violence has increased massively in recent weeks. On Saturday, the most severe attack since the US invasion in 2003 was launched - a car bomb killed at least 135 people. The campaign is seen as a last-ditch effort to prevent the country from sliding into civil war. About 17,000 of the additional soldiers President Bush recently sent to Iraq are to participate in the offensive. According to ORF online, the US plan is for Iraqi and US soldiers to search residential areas of the capital for extremists and weapons and then seal off the areas so that insurgents will remain outside. The military mission will be among the biggest launched so far in Iraq. Colonel Doug Heckman, advisor of the 9th Iraq Army Division, predicted Sunday that this campaign will be "a larger offensive than the city has yet seen." Compared to earlier, unsuccessful military missions, this one could really make a difference, Heckman said.

Record Budget for US Army

¶4. Meanwhile, the US army will need a record 622 billion dollars to maintain its military and conduct the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. President Bush will convey a budget proposal to the Congress Monday with the highest expenditures for defense since the Korean war in 1952.

Particularly expensive for the US army are the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Centrist daily "Die Presse" reports that 141 billion dollars are earmarked for covering the costs of these wars from October 2007 to October 2008. Budget cuts in other areas are inevitable, especially Medicare and Medicaid. The new debt will amount to 200 billion dollars - nevertheless, the White House foresees a budget surplus for the year 2012. This latter goal especially was received with criticism on the part of the Democrats: Senator Kent Conrad pointed out the administration has simply excluded some areas of public spending when it set the goal of achieving a surplus within the next five years. Conrad also said the government was setting the wrong priorities.

US General Takes Over ISAF Troop

¶5. The outgoing Commander of the international ISAF troop, British General David Richards, has announced a NATO spring campaign in Afghanistan and predicted a victory over the radical-Islamic Taliban. Turning over the military command to US General Dan K. McNeill, Richards showed himself convinced the rebels could be vanquished through a new NATO offensive. However, the Taliban themselves predicted a "violent spring" with further suicide attacks.

Britain Sent Underage Soldiers to Iraq

¶6. Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair, already under heavy domestic pressure, is now facing criticism for London's having sent underage soldiers as part of the British contingent to Iraq. The government conceded this fact during a parliamentary inquiry. According to Ministry of Defense information, 15 soldiers aged 17 were "accidentally" sent to Iraq, four of them girls, but "fewer than five" stayed for more than three weeks. On June 24, 2006, the month when Britain began sending underage soldiers to Iraq, it also signed the UN convention about the rights of children, whose signatories pledge they will not send soldiers under the age of 18 into battle areas. Independent daily "Der Standard" quotes Liberal Democrat MP Sarah Teather as saying that the government had displayed a "shocking degree of incompetence." She demanded an apology from Prime Minister Tony Blair, pointing to the violation of British standards for sending soldiers into battle areas. Young people were neither mentally nor emotionally prepared for seeing bloodshed of the kind that is taking place in Iraq, the

parliamentarian argued. These charges add to the woes of Tony Blair, who is already under fire for a corruption scandal in his government. According to a recent poll, 56 percent of the British think he should resign immediately.

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